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My name is Blanka Engelberg. I came to England in 1948 and soon after married Dr. John Geller who practised in Croydon.

I am a survivor of Nazi persecution and till today live with the nightmares and horrible memories of the Second World War.

I did not feel strong enough to either talk or write before about my experiences during the Nazi occupation of Poland, where 5 million Jews died in the holocaust. Like many survivors, I have suppressed these painful memories.

It was after watching the television programme transmitted directly from Auschwitz to mark the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the camp by the Russians, and listening to the former inmates who were interviewed, that I decided to add my story to the many others for the benefit of the younger generation and in this particular case for Andy Veness.

My sister and I are soul survivors of a family of over two hundred. We were only teenagers when the Germans occupied Poland in September 1939 and forced the Jews to wear arm bands bearing the Star of David. Shopping and working were only permitted during special hours.

We heard rumours that the Germans were taking men away from their families.

My father and the younger of my two brothers hired a cart and went to a hiding place near to where my grandparents used to live. My uncle and two cousins joined them. Unfortunately all of them were killed a year later when the peasant Pole, with whom they lived, was drunk one day and was followed by two SS men to the house. The victims were buried in the garden.

My father had a printing business in Tarnow and although the Gestapo sealed off the premises at the very beginning of the occupation, they falsely accused my elder brother of printing anti-Nazi literature and put him in prison.

After a couple of months he and other prominent Jewish inhabitants were forced to sign statements by the Gestapo who then took them to Auschwitz in the first transport from Tarnow. Subsequently my mother received a letter informing her that her son had died of natural causes and that she could obtain his ashes for 5 zloty.

I myself experienced a severe interrogation by the Gestapo. They wanted me to identify a Pole, who had already been beaten up, as someone who had bought a copy machine in my father's shop. Luckily I was let free.

I lived with my mother and younger sister in the Jewish quarter of Tarnow. To split the 20,000 Jewish inhabitants, the Gestapo decided to send half each to the extermination camps of Belsen and Treblinka.

Life during this period was rough. There was a shortage of food, living accommodation was cramped and there was a constant fear of being sent with a transport to the extermination camps. We often had to go into hiding in cellars or bunkers at night to sleep.

On 1st March 1940, all Jews were moved into a Ghetto and this was supervised by the SS. 3,000 people, consisting of the elderly and children, were murdered.

Only people who were classified for work (including my mother, my sister and myself) were allowed to live and were put on trains to Plaszow labour camp, which was situated on the outskirts of Krakow, in July 1943.

The labour camp was built on the site of a Jewish cemetery. We walked on the stones of those who were buried before the war. The wooden barracks with two tiers of bunks were ready for us when we arrived. In the hot summer the bunks were infested with bugs and we preferred to spend the night outside.

Early morning the whistle was blown. We were counted again and again for hours, and recounted. Our ration for the day consisted of black coffee and a few slices of bread. At midday we were given hot soup made from horse-meat.

My mother, my sister and I spent the day working in the barracks "on the hill" where we made new army uniforms and repaired old ones. We heard after the war that the man who was the owner of the workshop and in charge of us, was an Austrian citizen by the name of Madrich. By having the inmates work for him he could prove that we were indispensable, like the Jews who went to work at Schindler's enamel factory outside Auschwitz.

In Plaszow again there was another selection. We all had to parade naked in front of laughing SS men. The healthier ones were picked out, but weaker and older ones like our mother (who was only 58 years' old) were then taken away. They died in the gas chamber.

Our next destination was Auschwitz. As soon as the transport arrived through the iron gates in August 1944, we were segregated. My sister and I registered under different names knowing that the Germans wanted to break up families. We stayed together and the numbers A 18865 and 18866 were tattooed on our arms.

We had to undress, were shaved and disinfected in the shower rooms. We felt completely dehumanised, without our hair, and did not recognise each other. Our belongings were taken away. We were given wooden clogs as shoes, and a striped dress to wear.

We were taken to the main annexe of Auschwitz, two miles away, known as Birkenau. The gas chamber and crematorium were operated from another part of the camp, but we could smell the stench of burned bodies everywhere.

The barracks were overcrowded, unheated, filthy and had stone floors. The water was undrinkable. We lived on beet soup and even this food ration was irregular.

We were not put to work which worried us about our chances of survival.

The Germans were expecting new transports from Greece and loaded us into cattle trucks on a 2-3 days' journey to Stutthof near Danzig.

Approaching the camp there was a little forest and our first thought was that the Germans had brought us there to fell the trees, but luckily this was not the case.

On the first roll call, the commander of the camp, who was a woman, was looking for someone who spoke German and could act as an interpreter. I hesitated to come forward but my younger sister pushed me to go and not to lose any time. This decision turned out to be the right one. We were both provided with new and warmer clothing. I had extra rations - as much as I wanted, and was able to help others which made life easier in the sub-zero temperatures. With the lack of medicines, an outbreak of typhus was soon out of control. My sister contracted it in the early stages and was running a very high temperature. One night she went out of the barrack and fell over. I heard her crying and brought her back to the bunk. With the unexpected help of a German SS "Aufseherin" (female guard), my sister's health improved but the septic wounds on both of her legs troubled her right up until the end of the war. (After the liquidation of the camp we heard that this woman guard had been killed by the Germans as punishment for helping the needy).

It was still dark when the morning call took place. All the inmates had to go out of the barrack and stay outside for hours until the counting was finished.

My sad duty was to go through the barrack, bring out the inmates who had died during the night and put them on a heap. I had to make sure that the numbers of the living and dead were correct and that everyone was accounted for.

On one or two occasions I would find a woman hanging on the electrified barbed wire after committing suicide, or a hungry woman leaning over a dead body and cutting the liver out of the corpse.

After experiencing such episodes, I can hardly believe that I could one day live a normal life.

On 25th April 1945, the Russians started bombarding Gdansk (Danzig). The Germans filled up the crematorium with people who were not fit to walk and then burnt it down.

With the help of a friendly inmate I was able to carry my sister up to a cargo ship which was waiting for us in the harbour.

The voyage to freedom was terrifying. How can I begin to describe it. There was no food or drinking water and the voyage lasted 10-14 days. We had to lie on straw, were unable to move, and had no fresh air. We were waiting for the end to come. In addition to the terrible conditions, the ship was regularly bombarded. It caught fire and in the middle of the night the Germans, in fear of their lives, transported us on lifeboats to another ship. There we were provided with blankets, hot soup from big army containers and dry rusks.

We eventually arrived in Kiel on 3rd May, 1945. The war was already over and we were housed in a displaced persons camp. Despite the liberal conditions it was a long time before we dared go out or stopped hiding our food under our beds.

I remember the words of the President of Israel when he visited Auschwitz and signed the museum's visitors' book. He wrote "May the lessons of horror which this place represents in man's inhumanity to man, be an eternal lesson for mankind".